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# THE PALIMPSEST

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## The Rock Island Comes

Railroad building before 1850 was sporadic, haphazard, and controversial. While the practicability of steam railroad transportation had been demonstrated, opinion as to its importance relative to canal and river traffic was by no means certain. Each road, usually a short line, was a separate enterprise undertaken upon the initiative of adventurous promoters. Instead of forming a system to join commercial centers and connect waterways, the roads began and ended almost anywhere. As early as 1828, William C. Redfield had described a "geographical" trunk-line route from New York City to Rock Island, touching the important lake ports and affording a direct overland connection between the Mississippi River and the Atlantic Ocean, but the project did not materialize for a quarter of a century and then the line consisted of several roads separately owned and managed.



The first railroad to be completed between Chicago and the Mississippi had its beginnings on February 27, 1847, when the Illinois legislature incorporated "The Rock Island and La Salle Railroad Company". This corporation was granted the right to survey, locate, construct, and maintain a railroad "from the town of Rock Island on the Mississippi River in the County of Rock Island, to the Illinois River, at the termination of the Illinois and Michigan Canal". The capital stock was fixed at \$300,000 and a commission was appointed to receive subscriptions.

Early in 1848 the stockholders met in Rock Island to elect directors and officers. Judge James Grant, an attorney and railroad enthusiast of Davenport, Iowa, was chosen president, N. B. Buford, secretary, and A. K. Philleo, treasurer. But a feeling of apathy was apparent in the towns along the route and the sale of stock was slow. Indeed, the people of Iowa seemed more interested than the settlers in Illinois, for the citizens of Davenport and Scott County subscribed for almost half the stock. Although meetings were held periodically, nothing seemed to be accomplished and by 1850 grave misgivings if not open dissension was expressed in many communities.

But help was coming to the Rock Island and La Salle Railroad Company from an unseen quar-



ter. In the fall of 1850, Henry Farnam, an engineer and contractor in New Haven, Connecticut, visited Chicago upon the invitation of William B. Ogden, who hoped to interest him in the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad. Farnam was impressed with the West and returned shortly with Joseph E. Sheffield, his friend and wealthy partner. Together they made a trip by carriage along the Illinois and Michigan Canal to La Salle and thence to Rock Island where they learned of the projected railroad. Visions of this eighty-mile road forming a link in a lucrative transcontinental system lured them to participate in the enterprise, but sober second thought made them realize that the short line would be almost certain to fail unless a terminus could be secured on Lake Michigan to connect with the eastern railroads and benefit from the commerce on the Great Lakes. After considerable negotiation, they agreed to build the road if the charter could be amended to extend the line from La Salle to Chicago. It was a golden opportunity for the local stockholders. The officers of the R. I. & L. S. promptly commenced planning for action at the next meeting of the Illinois legislature.

While James Grant was engaged in securing the revision of the articles of incorporation, the firm of Sheffield and Farnam contracted with



John B. Jervis to build the Michigan Southern and Northern Indiana from Hillsdale, Michigan, into Chicago, a distance of one hundred and sixty-seven miles. Farnam believed that with the consummation of this work, the union of the Atlantic with the Mississippi would soon become an accomplished fact.

Meanwhile, fearful lest the canal interests would prevent the construction of a railroad paralleling the waterway, Farnam warned Grant on January 22, 1851, to "be sure to get the charter to make the road on the shortest route from La Salle to Chicago, and even if they insist on your paying tolls on freights taken from points along the canal." It was largely through this concession, perhaps, that the Illinois legislature passed an act on February 7, 1851, authorizing the extension of the railroad from La Salle to Chicago by way of Ottawa and Joliet, for the bill stipulated that the railroad was to pay tolls during the season of navigation on all business taken from or destined to any point on the Illinois and Michigan Canal or twenty miles west of its termination at La Salle. By way of compensation, the railroad was to obtain a right of way through canal lands and State lands, and the amount of tolls paid was to be deducted from its taxes. The name of the corporation was changed to the Chicago and Rock Island



Railroad Company, and the capital stock could be increased to any sum not exceeding three million dollars.

In compliance with the terms of the new charter, additional stock to the amount of \$300,000 was subscribed and the company was reorganized with a larger board of directors on April 8, 1851. The officers of the Rock Island and La Salle took charge of the affairs of the new company until the annual meeting in December. With the encouragement of eastern capitalists, preparations for construction proceeded rapidly.

As early as December, 1850, before the charter had been amended, a survey of the route between Rock Island and Peru had been commenced under the direction of Richard P. Morgan, chief engineer for the Rock Island and La Salle Company. This work was almost completed by the following April.

At that time William Jervis was appointed chief engineer of the new company. He promptly began operations on the line from Peru to Chicago, ably assisted by Samuel B. Reed, John E. Henry, and B. B. Brayton. These men, and others who joined them later, were experienced in both canal and railroad construction. Some had held responsible positions on the Erie Canal, while younger men, such as Peter A. Dey, had been



employed on the Michigan Central or the Michigan Southern and Northern Indiana.

The new engineers encountered unexpected delays from the unprecedented high water of 1851, and the board of directors was unable to let the contract for construction on June 26th as they had planned. They therefore determined to "refer the subject of making a contract for building the entire road to the Executive Committee, and have that portion of the line between Peru and Rock Island, revised and straightened, and the roadbed raised above the overflow of the streams". The surveys and estimates were completed in August and on September 6, 1851, a contract was concluded with Sheffield and Farnam in New York. Drawn by Judge Grant, the contract provided for "the construction and equipment of the whole road, including all cost, except right of way, station-grounds, fencing and incidental expenses", for the gross sum of \$3,987,688. Of this amount, \$2,000,000 was to be paid in seven per cent bonds, \$500,000 in cash at the rate of \$25,000 a month, and the balance in certificates of stock. The contract was unanimously approved by the board of directors at a meeting held in Rock Island on September 17, 1851. The bonds, secured by a first mortgage on the road, were issued to Shepherd Knapp of New York on December 23rd.



The firm of Sheffield and Farnam was well-qualified to build a railroad. Joseph E. Sheffield was a man of keen business foresight who had amassed considerable wealth in a North Carolina cotton mill. Returning to his native State of Connecticut, he had for fifteen years been closely associated with Henry Farnam in canal and railroad projects, matching his fortune against his partner's engineering skill, indefatigable energy, and bold courage. The risks appeared to be about equal, and it was mutually understood that "if any profit resulted it should be equally divided". While Farnam worked in the front lines, Sheffield took upon himself "the entire charge and control of the financial part of the enterprise".

Henry Farnam lost no time in beginning construction. When the board of directors met in Chicago on December 22, 1851, President Grant was proud to report that the contractors had "under-let the grading and masonry of the road from Chicago to Ottawa, eighty-five miles, and in a few days will conclude contracts for the same work as far as Indiantown, a distance of one hundred and twenty miles. A contract for building the bridge across Rock river, the heaviest work on the road, will be concluded in a few days. Engagements are also made for the iron for the whole road. Ten thousand tons, sufficient to finish it to



Peru, are to be delivered next year, and the balance the year following." The track was already laid as far as the junction with the Michigan Southern and Northern Indiana at what is now the Englewood station and about eight hundred men were laboring on the line between Chicago and Ottawa.

President Grant felt that a number of factors combined to insure the future success of the company. The traffic of the Illinois River and the Illinois and Michigan Canal, the unity of interest with the eastern lines which were steadily extending westward into Chicago, the commerce of the Great Lakes and the coal beds situated along the line of the road, were of immediate significance. Equally important, however, were the proposed bridge connecting Rock Island with Davenport and the bill before Congress "to grant the State of Iowa land, to aid in constructing a road from Davenport to Council Bluffs, intersected by another from Dubuque to Keokuk". The rapid increase of population in Iowa, particularly in the southern and central portion of the State, he thought, would redound to the ultimate good of the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad. "It falls to our lot", he concluded, "to forge an important link in this great chain across the Continent, and we have every motive of pecuniary advantage,



and obligation of duty to ourselves and our country, to stimulate us to the successful completion of a work which we have commenced under such favorable circumstances."

Following President Grant's report at the annual meeting on December 22, 1851, a new board of directors was chosen consisting of John B. Jervis, James Grant, N. D. Elwood, Isaac and Ebenezer Cook, Elisha C. Litchfield, John Stryker, George Bliss, Lemuel Andrews, P. A. Whitaker, Charles Atkinson, Theron D. Brewster, and John Stevens. The officers elected were: John B. Jervis of New York, president; James Grant of Davenport, vice-president; N. D. Elwood of Joliet, secretary; and Azariah C. Flagg of New York, treasurer.

The choice of John B. Jervis for president was wise. Jervis had gained valuable engineering experience on the Erie Canal and on the Delaware and Hudson canal and railway system. In 1836 he had become the chief engineer on the Croton Aqueduct, and in 1850 had engaged in the construction of the Michigan Southern and Northern Indiana Railroad. Exactly four months after he became president of the Chicago and Rock Island Company, on April 22, 1852, the first train of the M. S. & N. I. entered Chicago over the newly laid track of the Rock Island to the junction of the two



roads. The rails to this point (Englewood) had been laid early in January and thus the final links in welding the first railway bond between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mississippi River were completed under his administration.

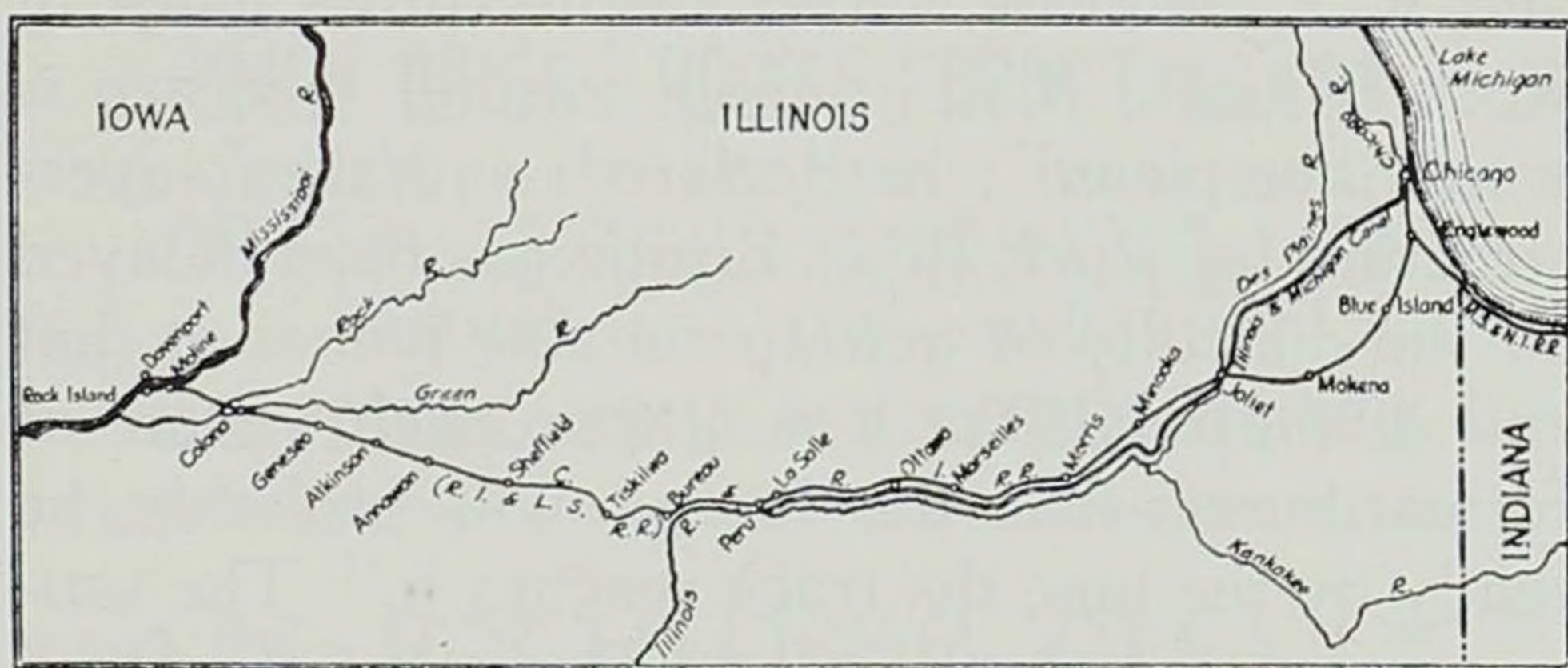
The year 1852 witnessed a rapid extension of the road westward. By the first of October chief engineer William Jarvis reported nine-tenths of the grading between Chicago and Peru completed and ready for track. The track layers were not far behind and on October 10, 1852, the locomotive "Rocket" came puffing into Joliet with six new and beautifully-painted coaches. The road was said to be "remarkable for its smoothness and solidity" and engineer James Lendabarker was able to make the run to Joliet "easily" in two hours. Among the passengers on this memorable trip, besides railroad officials, was J. A. Matteson, the Governor of Illinois.

The completion of the road to Morris on January 5, 1853, was the signal for another celebration. The "unceasing influx of travelers" into this hitherto "quiet village" led the Morris *Yeoman* to declare that "one would imagine that our town was the terminus of all creation instead of the Rock Island and Chicago Railroad".

Ottawa celebrated the arrival of the railroad on February 14, 1853, leaving only sixteen miles of



staging to the Illinois River. This was considered a "hard piece of road" but with the "iron going down rapidly beyond Ottawa" it was felt a "little patience on the part of the traveling public" would be rewarded by the completion of the road to Peru. Jubilant over the rapidity with which the



THE ROUTE OF THE CHICAGO AND ROCK ISLAND RAILROAD

Rock Island was being constructed, the *Chicago Tribune* observed that in "a few years more these rays of commercial light will stretch across our broad prairies forming a perfect net-work of communication from one end of the state to the other. Train after train will traverse our fertile plains, like busy bees, gather together the vast products of our rich soil and indomitable industry, and with the speed of the wind carry them off to some distant market."

A lull in construction followed the completion of the Rock Island to Peru. Track laying west of



that city was resumed in June and the contractors "commenced running passenger and freight trains to Tiskilwa September 12th, and Sheffield October 12th." Chief engineer William Jervis informed the board of directors on December 19th that the track was entering Geneseo that very day and was therefore within twenty-three miles of Rock Island. "The grading west of Geneseo is nearly completed", he declared, and the "superstructure for Rock River Bridge has been delayed by the difficulty of getting suitable timber at that end of the road, but it is now in such a state of forwardness, that the bridge will probably be ready by the time the track reaches it." The estimates for "work done" to December 1, 1853, totalled \$3,440,000 as follows: grading and bridging, \$1,202,000; track and superstructure, \$1,432,000; stations, \$191,000; equipment, \$348,000; material delivered, \$171,000; and engineering, \$96,000.

Jervis reported a sufficient number of iron rails on hand in Chicago to complete the track by March 1, 1854. But the rolling stock stipulated in the contract — 18 locomotives, 12 passenger cars, 150 covered freight cars, and 100 platform freight cars, and 50 gravel cars — was already inadequate. "The traffic on the road has been so large," he declared, "that it has been difficult to



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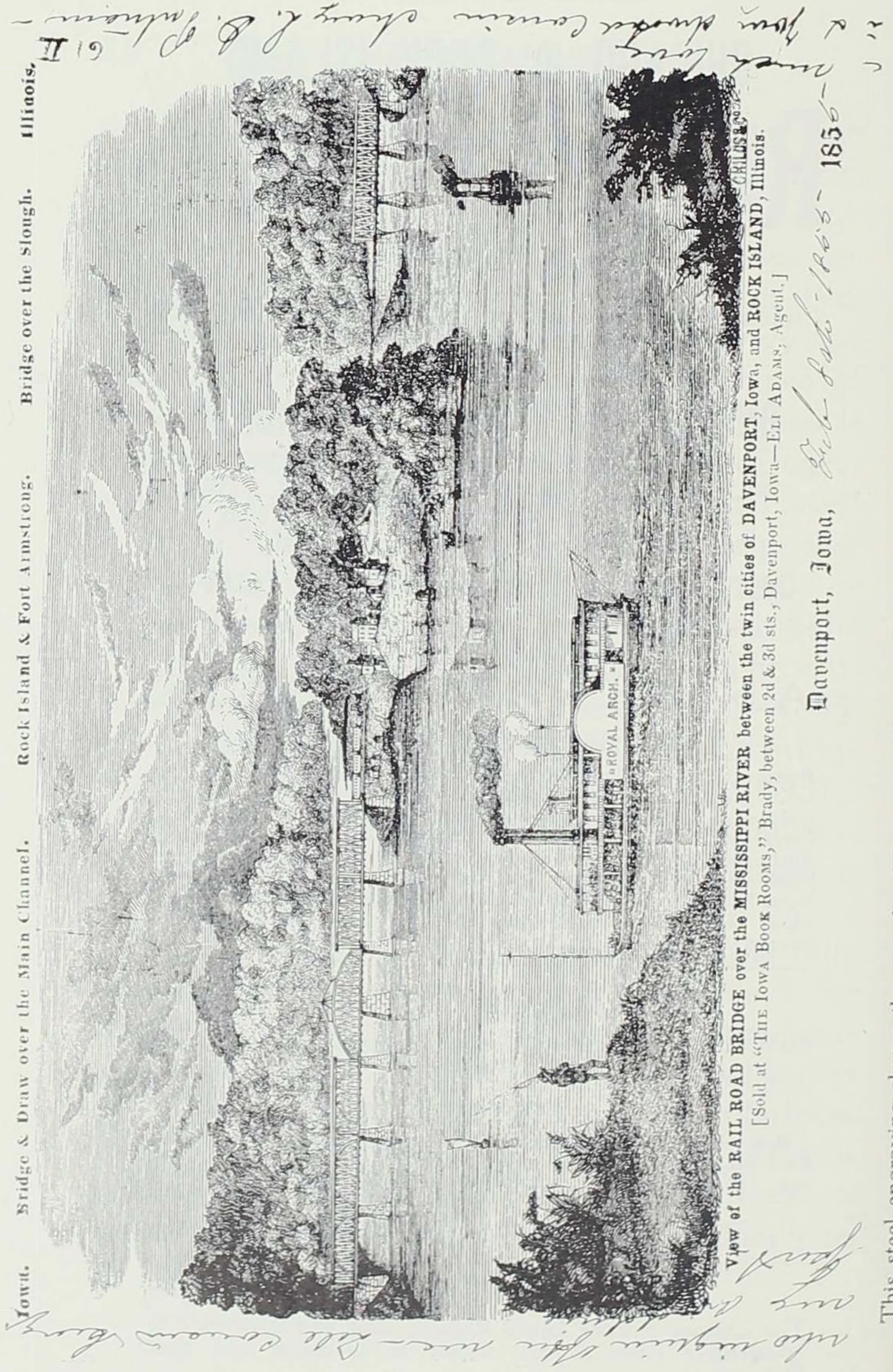
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*From Umberhine & Gustin's Dunleith City Directory  
and Advertiser for 1861*

The Chicago & Rock Island Railway Line was advertised in competitive cities as far distant as Dubuque and East Dubuque.





Iowa. Bridge & Draw over the Main Channel. Rock Island & Fort Armstrong. Bridge over the Slough. Illinois.

View of the RAIL ROAD BRIDGE over the MISSISSIPPI RIVER between the twin cities of DAVENPORT, Iowa, and ROCK ISLAND, Illinois.  
[Sold at "The Iowa Book Rooms," Brady, between 2d & 3d sts., Davenport, Iowa—ELI ADAMS, Agent.]

Davenport, Iowa, Feb. 8th 1856 - 1856 -

This steel engraving shows the completed bridge which was open to traffic in 1856. It appeared at the top of a personal letter actually dated a year before — February 8, 1855.



provide machinery fast enough to do the business, and leave enough to push the ballasting; consequently, this work west of Peru is not in as forward a state as other portions of the road; but the contractors propose to continue the distribution of ballasting material during the winter, and put it under the track in the spring. This course, if vigorously prosecuted, will enable them to complete the road by the tenth of July, 1854" — fully a year and a half earlier than the time designated in their contract. As soon as the road was finished, he predicted, two daily passenger trains through to Rock Island would be required, and "one additional train between Chicago and Peru, during the greater portion of the year." For the freight business, "at least one daily through train, one between Chicago and Peru and one coal train" would be necessary.

The completion of the railroad to the Mississippi was commemorated by two celebrations: one essentially local in character culminating in a banquet and jubilant speeches, the second national in scope and commonly denominated the Grand Excursion, involving a trip from Chicago to Rock Island and thence to Saint Paul by steamboat. The first of these celebrations was held in Rock Island immediately after the track laying was finished into that city on February 22, 1854.



The locomotive which drew the six first-class passenger cars out of Chicago on Washington's birthday was "handsomely decorated with wreathes and garlands". Every one was looking forward with "pleasing anticipations" to the thrill of gazing upon the bosom of the Father of Waters from the windows of the first railway passenger coaches to reach the great river. The train was welcomed by a salute of field pieces at Joliet and Ottawa, where municipal officials and other dignitaries joined the excursion. Over three hundred passengers were aboard the cars when the train left Peru and "sped its way across the broad and fertile prairies, anxious to reach its destination".

The booming of cannon heralded the approach of the first train to enter Rock Island and "such was the despatch used, that the last rail had scarcely been laid one hour, ere the cars passed over." A large temporary building in which to entertain the guests at dinner had been constructed in less than three days. When everybody had gathered about the tables, the "president of the day", N. B. Buford, introduced J. J. Beardsley, who delivered the address of welcome, dwelling at some length upon the "first union of the Mississippi and the Atlantic in the bands of commerce". In behalf of the city of Rock Island he declared it



"an appropriate time to do honor to a great achievement, that will mark an era in the history of the world's progress; and make our heart-felt and grateful acknowledgments to those who stood by our favorite enterprise in the days of its weakness and peril, and render a fitting tribute to those who with renewed zeal and fidelity have put in execution the wise design of the projectors of the Chicago and Rock Island railroad."

At the conclusion of his address, the company "helped themselves" to the abundant feast which was spread out in "prodigal profusion" before them. When every one had signified "enough", Buford arose and proposed thirteen toasts. Chief among them were the names of George Washington, Sheffield, and Farnam, the president and directors of the road, the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad, the Rock Island and La Salle Railroad, and the states of Illinois and Iowa. There were also a number of volunteer toasts such as, "To the Irish Laborers — The men who dig our canals, build our railroads, work in our fields and stables; and only ask a living, and freedom to worship God."

Henry Farnam responded to the toast to the contractors, saying he "would rather build two railroads than make one speech". Then he simply but graphically traced the events of the past few



years. "It is less than one-quarter of a century, and within the recollection of the most of you, that the first locomotive made its appearance in the States. Now, more than fourteen thousand miles of iron rails are traversed by the iron horse with almost lightning speed. It is less than two years since the first train of cars entered the State of Illinois from the East, then connecting Lake Erie with Chicago. It is less than one year since the first continuous line of road was completed connecting New York with Chicago. Now, there are two distinct lines the entire distance connecting Chicago and the great prairies of the West with New York and Boston. Two years ago, there was less than one hundred miles of road in operation in the State of Illinois, and most of that was what is called the 'strap rail'. Now more than twelve hundred miles of road of the most substantial character is in operation, eight hundred of which leads directly to the city of Chicago.

"To-day, we witness the nuptials of the Atlantic with the Father of Waters. To-morrow, the people of Rock Island can go to New York the entire distance by railroad, and within the space of forty-two hours."

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN